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Billionaire brothers undermine democracy, demonstrators say

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Hundreds of environmentalists, union members and liberal activists converged on Rancho Mirage on Sunday to rally against what they see as the influence of two of the nation's leading financial backers of conservative causes.

The protestors waved signs condemning "corporate greed," chanted slogans and surged toward a line of helmeted police officers at the entrance to a resort where billionaires Charles and David **Koch** were holding a retreat for prominent conservative elected officials, major political donors and strategists.

Protest organizers said they hoped to raise awareness about the **Koch** brothers and what activists portray as their shadowy attempts to weaken environmental protection laws and undercut campaign contribution limits.

The brothers control **Koch** Industries, the nation's second-largest privately held company. They have funded groups pushing a limited-government, libertarian agenda, helped organize "tea party" groups and contributed \$1 million to a failed ballot initiative to suspend California's law to curb greenhouse gases.

"We cannot have democracy unless everyone has a voice," said Cathy Riddle, a Temecula website developer who held a sign reading "Corporations are not people." Donors like the **Koch** brothers are "drowning us out," she said. "Their voices are louder."

The orderly protest, involving 800 to 1,000 people, ended after the arrest of 25 people for trespassing, according to authorities.

Koch spokeswoman Nancy Pfotenhauer said the closed-door meeting, the eighth of its kind, "brings together some of America's greatest philanthropists and job creators ... who share a common belief that the current level of government spending in our nation is simply unsustainable."

The meeting is focusing on ways to reduce the rising federal deficit, she said, as well as "strategies to promote policies that will help grow our economy, foster free enterprise and create American jobs."

The guest list was confidential, but attendees included House Republican leader Eric Cantor of Virginia. In past years, guests or speakers have included other GOP leaders and commentator Glenn Beck.

Sunday's rally outside the Rancho Las Palmas resort came after a midterm election year of unprecedented attention on the **Koch** brothers and their role in the nation's politics. For decades, the family has underwritten conservative organizations and campaigns, providing significant funding for the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Protesters held a Sunday morning panel discussion that mostly focused on a Supreme Court decision, Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission, that permitted corporations and unions to contribute directly to political campaigns.

Critics said Sunday that the **Kochs**, who have interests in oil, energy pipelines, chemicals and a range of consumer products, backed groups that supported the court's decision.

They echoed concerns of President Obama, who has criticized a group that David **Koch** helped form, Americans for Prosperity. The president cited AFP as an example of special-interest money that poured into last year's campaigns after the high court decision. AFP had said it planned to spend \$40 million in 2010 campaigns.

This month, the watchdog group Common Cause delivered a letter to the Justice Department saying that Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas should have disqualified themselves from the Citizens United case if they had taken part in a meeting the **Kochs** sponsored. A Supreme Court spokesman said neither justice participated in the meeting but said Thomas "dropped by."

Bob Edgar, president of Common Cause and a former Democratic congressman, told rally participants that the **Kochs** "are at the center of a hard-core conservative political network" that wants to roll back consumer protections and undercut fair elections.

"This is a fight for nothing short of the heart and soul of America," he said.

Republican defenders of the **Kochs** accuse critics of being hypocritical, saying Democratic causes have similarly large donors.

Grover Norquist, president of the conservative Americans for Tax Reform, has attended **Koch** meetings. He said the brothers were simply encouraging political participation. "Common Cause pretends to be in favor of political engagement and free speech, and now they are shouting down a group that wants to be engaged," he said.

The **Kochs** "encourage people to get involved in politics, support think tanks, to start think tanks. It's important work."

But Jeff McCall, 67, a retired Upland teacher who was near the front lines of Sunday's protest, said he felt compelled to demonstrate against the Supreme Court's relaxation of corporate political contributing.

"It's putting American democracy in the hands of people like the **Kochs** and others," he said. "It's not who you vote for; it's how much money you've got."

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: UNWELCOME: An estimated 800 to 1,000 marched outside the Rancho Las Palmas Resort, where Charles and David **Koch** held a retreat. The billionaires have underwritten a number of conservative groups. PHOTOGRAPHER:Katie Falkenberg For The Times PHOTO: FRONT LINES: The **Kochs**, whose guests included House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.), have come under increased political scrutiny in the last year. PHOTOGRAPHER:Katie Falkenberg For The Times PHOTO: ARRESTS: Jacqueline Young was one of 25 protesters charged with trespassing, officials said. PHOTOGRAPHER:Katie Falkenberg For The Times

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